

## **Shining a light on the endlessly divisive social conflicts**

**By John Anderson, The Australian, 25 February 2019**

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Over the past 12 months, I have recorded three long conversations with Jordan Peterson [Canadian clinical psychologist, in Sydney ahead of his Q&A appearance] because I believe he is making a tremendously important contribution to the public square.

All seven of his events featured in his trip to Australia last year were sold out, triggering my initial interest in recording a conversation for my website.

I believe there are five main reasons for this high level of interest. Each one of these reasons I believe shines a light on the very essence of the increasingly divisive social conflict of our times.

First, as discovered immediately in our first conversation, Peterson is highly intelligent, widely read and possesses an excellent memory. His deep reading of history, and especially his distilled understanding of the dangers of totalitarianism and the warnings it provides about our desire to control others, is remarkable. I also uncovered his marked understanding of Russian writers such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose remarkable works undoubtedly brought forward the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn famously describes how he, counterintuitively, found freedom in the brutal Soviet prison where he was detained as a political prisoner. Listening to the thumping and screaming as a guard assaulted another prisoner, he found an extraordinary personal freedom when he realised that the guards, too, were enslaved in their own way. He wrote that the dividing line between good and evil lies somewhere across every human heart. It does not lie between, as he put it, man and woman, captor and captive, Catholic and Baptist, or black and white. Thus, Peterson understands the dangers of modern identity politics, which seeks to divide our society into ugly self-righteous power blocks competing with one another for authority, at great cost to harmony and co-operation and therefore to our democratic freedoms.

Second, as we now know, many of our fellow Australians take Peterson seriously. I was privileged to be the MC when he spoke to a packed hall in Sydney's Chatswood last year. Close to 1000 people, very many of them young, gave him a standing ovation before he even spoke — the likes of which I have never seen before. They gave him another 90 minutes later when he finished, and a third after 30 minutes of questions. He reaches people through the power of his arguments, his willingness to be personally vulnerable and his evident concern for others. Furthermore, he understands the place of thinking and of emotion, and knows the difference, which is plainly appreciated by many grown tired of emotional manipulation.

I witnessed young men particularly responding to his blunt message that life is tough, even terrible, and that there is no point expecting governments or their agencies to find a solution for our problems. We need “to retreat to our bedrooms and make our beds”. By this he means we must examine ourselves properly, be honest about our own failings, no matter how serious, and seek to sort ourselves out first. Only then can we go out and seek to be as noble as we can in helping build a better world.

Third, this message is valuable in itself. As Peterson points out, often with real emotion, far from feeling rejected or pushed away by “tough love”, young Australians especially respond extraordinarily. As I have seen first-hand, individuals go to him to personally thank him for his encouragement; as he puts it, even a little can go a very long way. As Jean Baudrillard put it: “Postmodernity lacks the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, - originality and authenticity ... amid ... a random swirl of empty signals.” On this, Peterson is surely right: postmodernism isn’t doing it for us.

Fourth, this concern for the individual is surely the place to begin for those who are worried about our fracturing culture. Australia, in the end, is the sum total of the individuals that comprise it. Self-aware, resilient and resourceful individuals will neither want nor encourage an intrusive and ultimately stultifying nanny state. At the same time, they will be better equipped, able and willing to support and encourage those who are less fortunate. As Peterson puts it, our society’s redemption will come not through politics, but rather through the considered transformation and participation of individuals.

Fifth, Peterson has demonstrated that there is a place for courage and decency even in the fragmented “virtual public square” that social media has supercharged, through his refusal to sink to the level of his opponents, who hurl trite and empty, but nasty, accusations of racism, homophobia and bigotry at him. There can be no doubt that the fear of “death by social media” has silenced many who disagree with the zeitgeist; courage does not require us to be unafraid but that we master those fears and engage calmly, rationally and respectfully.

Peterson and I are joined in conversation on my website ([johnanderson.net.au](http://johnanderson.net.au)), which is being released concurrently with this column, by Dave Rubin of The Rubin Report. Like Peterson, Dave has a huge international following and has also demonstrated that with courage and imagination, social media can be harnessed for good, even in the face of a warning from eminent historian Niall Ferguson that social media threatens the stability of Western societies. It is vitally important that we rediscover the genius that lies behind the harmony and therefore the freedom of Western cultures: and that is the capacity to coexist with our deepest differences. We must recommit to respecting the worth and dignity of our fellow citizens, even when we profoundly disagree.

Rubin and I fundamentally differ on several issues, yet as this conversation demonstrates, it is possible to break into still waters after the storm of disagreement and genuinely enjoy one another’s company as we discuss our differences. And that, surely, is a goal well worth pursuing as the vital antidote to chaos without reason.

*John Anderson was deputy prime minister and leader of the Nationals from 1999 to 2005. His Conversations series, made up of video discussions about pressing issues with opinion leaders from Australia and abroad, can be found at [johnanderson.net.au](http://johnanderson.net.au).*